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Memory and Millennials: A Review of First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins

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MEMORY AND MILLENNIALS: A REVIEW OF *FIRST VISION: MEMORY AND MORMON ORIGINS*

Spencer R. Marsh

Abstract: *The multiple historical accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision have been an area of intense study, debate, and discussion for several decades. The newest addition to the discussion is a specialized monograph engaging the various accounts of the First Vision through the lens of psychology and, particularly, memory studies. This book, authored by Steven C. Harper, proves to be a valuable resource in answering some pressing questions about the integrity of the First Vision accounts, even though that was not the book's explicitly stated purpose. This review highlights these contributions as interpreted through the lens of a Millennial reviewer — a demographic widely assumed to be facing challenges today in recontextualizing, repurposing, and appreciating the First Vision, with which this new book can help.*

Review of Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). 271 pages with index. \$35.

The multiple historical accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision have been the subject of intense study and debate for the past several decades.¹ They have been published and discussed in both popular and academic venues.² Elder Russell M. Nelson wrote in 1996:

1. For some of the major contributions made to First Vision studies over the years, see Steven C. Harper and Samuel Alonzo Dodge, eds., *Exploring the First Vision* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012). For a review of that work, see Neal Rappleye, "Trusting Joseph," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013), 75–83, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/trusting-joseph/>.

2. For an informal survey of publications discussing the First Vision accounts see "First Vision accounts in Church publications," FairMormon,

The most prominent account of the First Vision, from which I have quoted, was prepared by the Prophet in 1838. At least three other accounts of the vision were also recorded. These accounts were given under different circumstances to different audiences and for different purposes. Because each account emphasizes different aspects of the same experience, some of the detractors of the Church have attempted to point out discrepancies in the several accounts. In the January 1985 Ensign appears a most noteworthy article by Milton V. Backman Jr., entitled “Joseph Smith’s recitals of the First Vision.” You will want to study this and become familiar with each of the recorded accounts of the First Vision so that you will not be disarmed if you hear that more than one account was given.³

In the October 1984 Ensign, President Gordon B. Hinckley wrote:

I am not worried that the Prophet Joseph Smith gave a number of versions of the first vision any more than I am worried that there are four different writers of the gospels in the New Testament, each with his own perceptions, each telling the events to meet his own purpose for writing at the time.⁴

Finally, Elder James E. Faust stated in the April 1984 General Conference:

There are several accounts of the magnificent vision near Palmyra recorded by the Prophet’s associates or friends before the Prophet’s death, who, at various times, heard the Prophet recount the First Vision. These accounts corroborate the First Vision as written Joseph Smith himself.⁵

The latest contribution to First Vision studies is Steven C. Harper’s book *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins*.

Brief Overview of Contents

The book is divided into three parts and twenty-eight chapters, with a small introduction at the beginning and a short afterword — all spanning 262

https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Joseph_Smith%27s_First_Vision/First_Vision_accounts_in_Church_publications.

3. Russell M. Nelson, “At the Heart of the Church,” in *The Prophet and his Work: Essays from General Authorities on Joseph Smith and the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 53.

4. Gordon B. Hinckley, “First Presidency Message: God Hath Not Given Us the Spirit of Fear,” *Ensign* (October 1984).

5. James E. Faust, “The Magnificent Vision Near Palmyra,” *Ensign* (May 1982).

pages. That makes chapter length average about nine pages. This is a blessing, however. The chapters are quick, they're informative, and they're specific — allowing Harper to educate as well as entertain the reader.

The first part of the book is dedicated to the *individual memory* of the First Vision by Joseph Smith, the middle to the *collective memory* of the First Vision by the Saints up through the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century, and the latter part to the *contested memory* of the First Vision, in which Harper traces the history of criticism that arose at the latter half of the twentieth century and that has continued into today. Harper writes:

The goal is to explain how [Joseph Smith] remembered his first vision, how others have remembered it, and what difference those memories have made over time. The book tells what Smith's various vision records reveal about the nature of memory both individual and collective, about the culture of Mormonism, and about the cultures in which it emerged and has since lived.

Put most simply, the book shows that the mere survival of Smith's vision memory depended on numerous contingencies, and the fact that it has become the genesis story of the Latter-day Saints was anything but inevitable. (p. 4)

Why I Am Writing This Review

I should preface the following review with a small personal introduction. I am a 23-year-old student in pre-business at Brigham Young University. I do not have a degree in history or psychology. I participated as a student in Harper's "Foundations of the Restoration" course at BYU, have read much of Harper's work on the First Vision, and hold personal admiration for him as a person, scholar, and faithful member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My review will focus on the value Harper's volume can hold for a Millennial/Generation Z population — a population widely assumed to be struggling most predominately with historical issues in the Age of Information.⁶ My review will highlight only a few parts of this volume that may resolve challenging apologetic

6. See Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). For reviews of this work see Stephen Cranney, "The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2019): 177–83; Armand L. Mauss, "The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church by Jana Riess," *Journal of Mormon History* 45, no. 3 (July 2019): 133–42.

issues related to the First Vision and help those navigating challenges to its reality find renewed confidence in the integrity of its historical accounts. This is not Harper's stated purpose. It is actually explicitly the contrary. Harper writes:

This is not a book for those interested in determining whether the vision actually happened, and if so whether it was in 1820 or 1824, or which of Smith's vision memories is more authentic or accurate than others (p. 3).⁷

That mentioned, the volume still confronts and answers some major objections to the reality of the First Vision using the tools of psychology and, particularly, studies in memory. What seems to emerge is both a scholarly reconstruction of events as Smith, in the words of Harper, *consolidated* his memories to fit the needs of the audiences he was communicating to and a narrative that can support faith in Joseph's story — even when that faith may or may not be challenged.

Individual Memory

Part one is dedicated to Joseph's *individual memory* of the First Vision. Harper dedicates 5 chapters contained in 34 pages of text to his study and proceeds somewhat opportunistically through the First Vision accounts to establish historical context — starting with the 1838 account, returning to the 1832 account in Joseph's personal history, then to the 1835 account(s) with Robert Matthews, and finishing with the 1842 account contained in Joseph's letter to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*.⁸ The goal is to establish historical background to each of the accounts and the thread starts with the rejection that Joseph faced from the Methodist minister he speaks of in the 1838 account (likely Reverend George Lane or Reverend Jesse Townsend⁹) after recounting the appearance of God and Christ. Only in the 1838 account is this

7. Harper has done other work geared toward providing a defense of the First Vision. For example, see Steven C. Harper, "Evaluating Three Arguments Against Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): 17–33. See also Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012).

8. To read all of the accounts see "Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Deity," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>.

9. "Sermons of a Palmyra Preacher," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 31 July 2015, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/museum-treasures-jesse-townsend-sermons?lang=eng>.

rejection remembered by Joseph. Thus the reason for Harper's ordering of the accounts for commentary. Harper writes:

The resulting rejection fractured Joseph Smith into an *ought self*, prescribed by cultural authorities like the clergyman, and an *actual self*, or what he knew from his own experience. Smith had approached God in crisis, desperate for salvation. Instead of assuring Smith that the resolution to his crisis was real, the minister's rejection caused dissonance within Smith — a divided self he innately had to reconcile. (pp. 9–10)

Harper returns to this rejection by the minister throughout his commentary on consolidation and how it affected Joseph's retellings of the vision. He writes:

Both the 1832 and 1838/39 memories are best read as responses to the Methodist minister. In 1832 Smith remembered to please him and the authority he represented. In 1838/39 he remembered to reject and replace the minister and the authority he represented. (p. 32)

Several important insights provided by Harper in this part include:

- The fracture Joseph supposedly felt from the minister, which may help us understand the paucity of historical documentation for retellings of the First Vision from 1820 to 1830.
- An introduction to the concept of *consolidation* or how a memory of an event is *remembered* after *dismembering*, which can explain why Joseph remembered the First Vision the way he did in the historical context of each account.
- An explanation of how the dichotomy between authentic and distorted memory is a false one, which can give us a robust answer to those that would seek to hold an infallible standard to Joseph's claims — one in which there isn't *any* contradiction or tension between accounts.
- Explaining that *how Joseph felt* during the vision would have been more memorable to him can help account for variation in or omission of technical details between accounts, like the exact month of the vision, what beings — whether God, Christ, angels, or some combination of them — appeared to him, whether he saw light or fire around him during the vision, and so forth.

One question came up in the second chapter of the book. Writing on Joseph's claim of persecution after the vision in the 1838 account, Harper writes, "Aside from the specific, stinging rejection by the Methodist minister, *there is no factual memory in this part of his 1839 narrative*. His memory of persecution in childhood was vague and impersonal" (emphasis added) (p. 18). Other researchers seem to have taken a slightly more conservative approach. Latter-day Saint historian Richard Lyman Bushman, commenting on the same claim, wrote, "What Joseph said explicitly was that the vision led to trouble, though his youthful sensitivity probably exaggerated the reaction."¹⁰ Where Harper denies almost any such trouble after the vision, Bushman affirms at least *some* commotion that was then exaggerated during this recital:

The talk with the minister, he remembered, brought on ridicule by "all classes of men, both religious and irreligious because I continued to affirm that I had seen a vision." Local people seemed to have discussed his case, even though he said nothing to his parents. Eighteen years later when he wrote his history, the memories of the injustices still rankled. For whatever reason, his father's family suffered "many persecutions and afflictions," he recalled, deepening a previous sense of alienation. William Smith remembered people throwing dirt, stones, and sticks against the Smith house. Later, after Alvin died, it was rumored someone had disturbed his body, and Joseph Sr. published a notice in the paper that the body had been exhumed and found to be untouched. Once someone fired a shot at young Joseph for no apparent reason.¹¹

Perhaps the inclusion of these events in Harper's analysis would have been more helpful to establishing everything that Joseph might have been responding to in the 1838/39 recital of events.

Collective Memory

The middle part of the book is dedicated to the *collective memory* of the Saints of the First Vision and how that consciousness has formed over the years. This part takes up most of Harper's study at roughly 130 pages. A few of the more helpful parts of this section include commentary about how the 1832 account didn't get consolidated into Latter-day

10. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 43.

11. *Ibid.*

Saint memory from the late nineteenth century into the middle of the twentieth century.

The 1838 account began to take precedence during this broad period from the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, through the John Taylor administration, and shortly beyond. Orson Pratt takes the central role in this part of the book as “the foremost relater in the process of consolidating a collective memory of the first vision” (p. 74). Pratt “was influenced in his selection and presentation by his argument about the materiality of God” (p. 75). Harper writes:

By choosing to attend to Joseph Smith’s first vision as he did, Orson Pratt taught the Latter-day Saints to pay attention to it. He tagged attention in the saints’ memory in a way that made it the specific referent in the otherwise general narrative of apostasy and restoration. (pp. 75–76)

The centrality of the 1838 account was solidified with the great publicity given to it by Orson Pratt, the composition of George Manwaring’s “Joseph Smith’s First Prayer” in the late 1870s, the abandonment of polygamy in the late 1890s through the very early twentieth century, and the questioning of the objective reality of the First Vision beginning in the mid 1890s. The 1838 account became especially appealing because, as Harper quotes:

“[W]hen a group feels physically, economically, or otherwise threatened, it often turns to the discursive realm” to remember in ways that facilitate survival. (p. 77)¹²

This insight is potentially useful in understanding how the Church as an organization has treated the memory of the First Vision over time. The battle seems always to have been uphill. There have always been critics to counter, a place to establish among mainstream Christianity, and a message to proclaim to the world with small numbers to proclaim it. It follows that Joseph’s 1838 account, which contains more memory of persecution than any of Joseph’s other accounts, would become the frontispiece on our rhetorical coat of arms. From this it is easy to extrapolate how little attention the other accounts of the First Vision would receive over time. The 1832 and 1835 accounts, in particular, receive a more focused treatment in this portion of the book — starting from when they were placed inside a trunk belonging to Willard Richards

12. Harper cites Thomas J. Anastasio et al., *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation: Analogous Processes on Different Levels* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 152.

when he became the Church Historian after returning from his mission to Britain in 1841

Richards had not selected them for consolidation by the saints, not related them meaningfully to their shared story, and not repeated them so they could become common knowledge. (p. 67)

The 1832 and 1825 accounts would be brought back to collective consciousness during a new wave of questioning that surfaced in the mid-twentieth century surrounding the historical reality of the vision.

Contested Memory

The last part of Harper's book is dedicated to the *contested memory* of the First Vision by critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This is a historical survey of critical scholarship that surfaced beginning with Dale Morgan, who began a new wave of source criticism into the Church's historical origins beginning in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Morgan was raised a Latter-day Saint but switched "faith-based explanations for psychological ones and began to view his society through a sociological lens" (p. 187). Harper then proceeds faithfully through the authoring of *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* by Fawn M. Brodie, the appearance of Sandra and Gerald Tanner's opposition to the Church beginning in the early 1960s, the work done by faithful historians in response to the criticism of Reverend Wesley P. Walters beginning in the late 1960s, the authoring of *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* by Grant H. Palmer in 2002, and ends with a review of the criticism seen today by popular critics such as John Dehlin and Jeremy T. Runnells. I was quite impressed with the charitable yet fair treatment Harper gives each of the critics who have sparked such controversy around the historical origins of the Church he remains a faithful member of today. I was impressed with his resistance to responding harshly to their critiques or to taking unjustified swipes at his "opponents" (though he does make measured critiques of each of their approaches).

This section is useful for indicating where we are today in the saga of memory of the First Vision — with the reestablishment of all of the historical accounts of it in our conscience, potentially causing a disruption in our collective memory of it and forcing some to find new ways to remember it that are intellectually stable and spiritually useful. Harper points out that the type of disruption we see today was basically

inevitable when the 1838 account had gained such prominence for more than 100 years.

He notes that Latter-day Saint historians working on the First Vision during the latter half of the twentieth century

were nearly powerless to alter the saints' collective memory or make it more resilient to critics. The disruptive potential of the newly discovered records and ways of interpreting them remained latent, waiting for an information age to unleash it. (p. 226)

This information age seems to be a challenge in that many people report that faith in the First Vision is diminished or even lost because of disruption to their memory of it and they are having to undergo a process of recontextualizing and repurposing it in their own minds. But this age also appears to be a zeitgeist for good in that we get to remember the First Vision and all accounts of it in a way that will both address contemporary concerns and provide something sustainable “for the rising generations” (Doctrine and Covenants 69:8). It doesn't seem, in Harper's analysis, that we haven't tried to prevent such developments but that we have simply relied on the strength and prowess presented in the 1838 account to take us through the more pressing concerns we faced in the first two centuries of the Church's existence. How we consolidate our collective memory (and how we reconcile both the good and bad ways we have attempted to consolidate that memory) now will be important for the growth of the Church moving forward as has been expressed by more articulate authors than myself.¹³

Conclusion

Harper's seems to be one of the most unique studies to have been undertaken to approach the First Vision,¹⁴ but it appears to be one of the most needed and most valuable approaches to the historical accounts. It answers some of the most heavy-hitting objections to the First Vision. That this volume was published with Oxford University Press is also significant. It can indicate a high level of quality in scholarship. It certainly indicates

13. Nathan B. Oman, “Welding Another Link in Wonder's Chain: The Task of Latter-day Saint Intellectuals in the Church's Third Century,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 32 (2019): 141–60.

14. A similar yet less lengthy approach was taken in Robert A. Rees, “Looking Deeper into Joseph Smith's First Vision: Imagery, Cognitive Neuroscience, and the Construction of Memory,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 67–80.

the reputation and qualifications of the scholar that brought it together. This is a book that seems accessible to both layperson and scholar alike. Latter-day Saints will appreciate the (perhaps even unintended) strength that Harper's scholarship gives to Joseph's story. This is a work that I believe will be valuable to anyone who reads it.

Spencer R. Marsh *is an undergraduate student at Brigham Young University with plans to study business and healthcare administration. He has done volunteer work for organizations such as FairMormon, The Interpreter Foundation, and Book of Mormon Central.*